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## Reagan's Staff Is Definitely Live on Arrival

Above the door frame in Donald Regan's White House office hangs a framed Japanese inscription, unintelligible unless you hail from Kyoto. If you are a sophisticate you will ignore the mystery as you conduct your business with the president's chief of staff. If you are not, you will eventually ask, "Hey, what is that thing?"

Gotcha!

Mr. Regan explains that the piece is a souvenir of some tough U.S.-Japanese trade negotiations and translates loosely as, "... and the horse you rode in on." It's the last line of a hearty and only slightly vulgar joke—which he then gets to tell, with evident pleasure. That's the way it is with Mr. Regan and the White House as they head into this spring's battles: bluff and straightforward, with a little something up their sleeve.

Toward the start of Mr. Regan's tenure, people wrote about how he was always hogging the limelight. Now, though, it is clear that the new system is more than the Regan elbows. For instance, Mr. Regan talks about himself and his goals in deliberately candid terms. In a recent interview he declared that when he had been secretary of the treasury, his goal had been "to get out of the recession that we stumbled into unwittingly right after we arrived here, and get out quickly and with the least damage." And now? "Gramm-Rudman is a great opportunity for getting our fiscal house in order, in order to allow monetary strictures to be loosened a little bit—thereby getting interest rates down."

He praised his boss Ronald Reagan strenuously: "He is a student of the Soviets and does an awful lot of homework on our relationships with the Soviet Union. A lot of people think he quits early and goes home; he doesn't. He goes back and studies and reads." And, said Mr. Regan, the president reads not only conservative materials but "also an awful lot of other things that are not what you would call in the conservative school."

Another White House official later drove the point home. One reason the

Washington establishment used to think President Reagan dim, he said, was that some senior White House staffers before Donald Regan had at times spread that impression of the president.

The White House is shaping up along Reganesque lines. Presidential aides in all administrations complain about being left out of staff meetings. But a lot of White House business used to get done through small, exclusive gatherings—separate sessions for legislative-strategy honchos, for instance. Now, more gets done at a daily meeting of 15 to 18 people. "I'm amazed at how frank the exchanges are," one old government hand said of them. "Of course, sometimes they also get into the press."

The conflict between presidential speech writers and other White House staff members runs on like a low-grade fever. But one senior staffer declared in a recent conversation that nowadays Donald Regan's administrative aides consider themselves as hard-line as anyone on fundamental economic issues. Dennis Thompson, one top Regan aide, hails from wheeling-and-dealing Capitol Hill, but he worked for Sen. William Roth of Kemp-Roth fame. Another aide, Thomas Dawson, was a foreign-service officer—and personal assistant to present CIA director William Casey. Even the White House administrators point to their ideological credentials.

The two groups fought during preparation of this week's State of the Union speech, but the story wore out in a couple of days instead of gathering steam. The White House these days is not the kind of warm, dark place where such things fester nicely.

Administration budget director James Miller had his colleagues' tone in an interview the other day as he talked about the Washington verdict that the Reagan budget would be "dead on arrival." "Part of the reason they say this," he explained calmly, "is that Gramm-Rudman-Hollings was a vote of no confidence in the budget committees and the process."

He said he had tried to give the agencies as much discretion as he could in distributing their cuts—"as long as they didn't play the Washington Monument game," in which a bureaucracy will try to take its cuts in its most popular activities, so that Congress will be moved to restore the money. It was getting harder to play these tricks in the agencies or in Congress: "Gramm-Rudman-Hollings has made a big difference. Now it's a zero-sum game"—if you refused to cut in one place you would have to cut in another.

When the administration came to office, most of us wondered when one or another of them would commit a crime so vast as to discredit the whole administration. It

hasn't happened. We wondered when Ronald Reagan would finally go for large fiscal compromise. We're still waiting. We wondered how the administration would resolve the tensions among its goals—big defense vs. small government, individualism vs. social issues.

Yet the Reaganites in power have maintained their energy and managed to keep the rhetorical high ground. You notice Irish Catholics among them, providing a lot of the energy of this effort. Over the years their values were squeezed out of the Democratic Party. The party is now getting its comeuppance.

"I think we're going to win," Mr. Miller said cheerily of the coming budget struggle. "There will be enormous wailing, a lot of posturing. But I don't believe that these representatives want to go back home and campaign on having just raised taxes or cut the knees out from under our defense posture."

He is not a neutral analyst. But today he and his administration colleagues sound like military officers planning the march on Berlin instead of a bunch of subversives plotting guerrilla warfare.

## Capital Chronicle

by Suzanne Garment